The River Ganges

Holy waters

People in India know it as the Ganga, or 'Mother Ganga', Westerners call it the Ganges: It is the longest river in all of India, more than 2,500 kilometers long. The Ganges river starts out from glaciers that lie in the Himalaya at about 4,100 meters above sea level[1]. From there it runs from northwest to the southwest, into Bangladesh, and then pours[2] into the Indian Ocean in the Bay of Bengal.

Source of life

Water means life. Rivers provide humankind with water to drink and for farming, and often they are important ways for the transport of goods and people. 400 million people get their water from the Ganges.

But the meaning that the Ganges has for Hindus goes much deeper than that. In Hinduism the river is believed to be holy. It is seen as a representation of the goddess Ganga, who is usually depicted[3] as a woman with a crown[4], holding water pots in her hands and riding a crocodile.

Many believers travel to Varanasi to wash away their sins[5] in the water. Hindus believe that if a religious ritual is performed in the river or nearby, it is many times more effective.

The great respect for the river also shows in the belief that a Hindu is not able to lie[6] while he or she is holding water from the Ganges in their hands.

Every summer the Ganga Dashami Festival is held to celebrate the coming down of the holy river from heaven to earth. People worship the Ganges by lighting candles and lamps, and by offering it flowers and milk.

They also hold their funerals[7] there. The bodies of the dead are burned by the side of the river and their ashes are poured into the Ganges.

Life and death by the river

The Ganges also is one of the most polluted rivers in the world. Industrial waste and chemicals are pumped into it, and the waste of millions of homes.

For the people who live near it, the Ganga is part of their daily lives. They cook, bathe and wash their clothes and dishes in the river.

It is estimated[8] that every year about two thirds of all the people who do that become seriously ill, and that one third of all deaths are caused by illnesses that the waters of the Ganges are carrying.

1. Read the text.
2. Collect information about the geography of the Ganges from the text.
3. Explain why the river plays an important role in Hinduism.
4. Name the reasons why pollution is a problem at the Ganges.

[1] sea level – *Meeresspiegel*; [2] to pour – *fließen; schütten*; [3] to depict – *darstellen*; [4] crown – *Krone*; [5] sin – *Sünde*; [6] to lie – *lügen*; [7] funeral – *Bestattung*; [8] to estimate – *schätzen*

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